DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 148 108 FL 009 023

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TITLE Using Films in Literature Courses.
PUB DATE Aug 76
NOTE 4p.; Paper presented at the Bicentennial Meeting of the American Association of Teachers of German (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, August 1976)
JOURNAL CIT Foreign Language Beacon; v13 n1 p16-18 Fall 1977

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Audio-visual Aids; Cultural Context; Cultural Education; *Films; Film Study; *Foreign Language Films; *German; German Literature; Instructional Materials; *Language Instruction; Language Laboratory Use; Listening Comprehension; *Second Language Learning; *Teaching Methods; Textbooks
IDENTIFIERS *Scenarios; Wir Wunderkinder

ABSTRACT

Films are becoming recognized as an important medium of foreign language instruction. Although there is a lack of instructional films in German, an abundance of excellent feature films is available through the German Embassy and various consulates. Well-edited scenarios are needed, however, in order to make using these films an effective teaching medium. The only textbook scenario available in German is Viola Herms Drath's "Wir Wunderkinder," a 1958 film which is a satire of German history from 1913 to 1956. This text is rich in cultural content and appropriate in pictorial and linguistic idiom, and, therefore, it provides an excellent transition from the intermediate level of language instruction to literature courses taught in the German language. Students first have listening and reading practice in the language laboratory and a question-and-answer period in the classroom on a particular section of the text. Then they hear that section in an excerpt from the film sound track. By the end of the course, student comprehension of the entire sound track is high. The teaching of German at all levels could greatly benefit from the development of more such scenarios. (Author/CFM)

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Using Films in Literature Courses

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Increasingly the use of film is becoming recognized as an important medium of instruction—in some instances, considered more effective than the written text.[1] Obviously, film is a great help in developing and holding student attention. Uniquely, film offers a depth of vicarious experience and a wide range of identification figures.[2] Given the popularity of film and its power to influence, we need to become more sophisticated in its use as a teaching device.

Although an excellent instructional film series exists for French students,[3] similar materials in German have tended to be more pedagogical than interestingly representative of German culture—the *Guten Tag* or *Europa Heute* series, for example. Recently, another French teaching film was developed in England by Mary Glasgow, who, encouraged by her success with *Toute la Bande*, has produced a short instructional film in German.[4] The apparent lack of outstanding film materials in German is, however, more than compensated for by the overabundance of excellent feature films available through the German Embassy and various consulates.

In order to use feature films as an effective teaching medium, though, well-edited scenarios are needed.[5] The usefulness of the film *Törless*, available through McGraw-Hill, would be greatly enhanced by the presence of a textbook scenario. In German, to my knowledge, there is, so far, only one such edition in existence: Viola Herms Drath's *Wir Wunderkinder*. This text is so rich in cultural content and appropriate in pictorial and linguistic idiom that it provides an excellent transition from the intermediate level of language instruction to literature courses taught in the German language.

A detailed analysis of *Wir Wunderkinder* introduces the students to such major and diverse concepts of German culture as "Die Gründerzeit," Die Völkerschlacht bei Leipzig," and "Fasching" festivals. The evolving significance of the military in German society is apparent in the opening scene, which ironically contrasts decadent Wilhelmine, Germany of 1913 with the vigorous Prussia which defeated Napoleon in 1813; the pictorial metaphor for this comparison is the ritual evocation of "Das alte Preussentum" by a Prussian society about to disintegrate in World War I. Such humorous encapsulations of history abound in *Wir Wunderkinder* and invite the introduction of many relevant high interest points by the way of explanation. German authority concepts are revealed throughout the film in societal classifications and successive governments. The economic and social chaos of the Weimar Republic, stimulating the rise of Nazism, and the typologies of the Nazi authority structure and power base are displayed in ironic contrast to the freedom of German university and student life in the 1930s. Reaction during the Weimar Republic to the Russian revolution is satirically reflected in the book, entitled *Die Erotik im Neuen Russland*, which the idealistic Hans receives from his landlady. The persecutions endured by Germans as well as Jews under Nazism are manifest in the destinies of Hans Boeckel and his school friend, Siegfried Stein. The innocent affiliation of many Germans with Nazism, based on general ignorance of its darker side, and the widespread simplistic or opportunistic fascination with Nazi propaganda are well documented and convincing. Finally, the positive view of the "Wirtschaftswunder" in the Bundesrepublik of the 1950s, as based upon the large-scale political involvement of the West German population, is salted with satire. Bruno Tiches, the opportunist and former Nazi, having escaped punishment, falls down an elevator shaft, and is honorably buried, attended by dignitaries who were once equally enthusiastic participants in the evils of the recent past. The student cabaret scene with its satire of emerging Nazism, suppressed in the film by storm troopers, provides an opportunity to discuss this ephemeral medium as it developed in Germany up to the modern Rock and Roll singers of current student night life and to point to the occurrence of the political cabaret in *Wir Wunderkinder* as the structural framework of the movie. A detailed study of this scenario and of the movie itself is thus well rewarded by insight into the cultural conceptualizations and historical forces which have shaped Germany's recent history.

The scenario of *Wir Wunderkinder*, edited as a textbook by Viola Herms Drath, is the basic reading text for the first semester of intermediate German at Bucknell. *German in Review* by Sparks and Vail was selected to supplement each reading assignment with a systematic overview of the major points of German grammar. The film is shown twice. The first showing occurs at the end of the first semester; the second showing, at the end of the next semester, is followed by a test for long-term retention. The first showing precedes the final examination on the first semester's work.

Wir Wunderkinder, Germany's most awarded film, was made in 1958. Its satirical depiction of German history from 1913 to 1956 has been uniquely distinguished by prizes from both Hollywood and Moscow. Its two central figures, Hans Boeckel, the idealist, and Bruno Tiches, the opportunist, are not only very German but easily recognizable as human types recurrent in all societies. The narrative begins with a festival in 1913 commemorating the "Völkerschlacht bei Leipzig" in 1813, which these two characters had attended as children, and follows their destinies throughout the two subsequent wars and intervening periods of relative peace. Alternately narrated by "Der Erklarer" and commented upon by a piano player—who evoke with their presence the format of German's political cabaret—the sequence of events is intermittently acted out in scenes of relatively short duration and consistently high levels of interest from human and intellectual standpoints.

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For instructional purposes, I divided the text of the scenario into 11 units, ranging from 10 to 20 minutes in reading time, on a tape and resulting in daily assignments of approximately 10 complete pages in length. (Each assignment is a unit with regard to plot and thematic development.) A native speaker, our German teaching assistant, read each of these units onto tape at a normal speaking speed, allowing time after each paragraph for student response reading. Each reading selection from *Wir Wunderkinder*, introduced first in the language laboratory, was heard twice on a listen-and-repeat basis. This often required the major portion of a 50-minute lab period.

If necessary, an additional session in the laboratory was scheduled to hear the taped exercises appropriate to the section of Sparks and Vail assigned for grammar review. Usually such practice followed the oral reading of the text in the lab. Take-home practice exercises and test sheets programmed for self-study combined the lexical and structural items of the reading text in sentences illustrating the grammar assignments in Sparks and Vail. These exercises supplemented the students' classroom and lab experiences by stimulating and reinforcing independent use of the language material being learned. Since each section of the various laboratory experiences varied in length, a song, popular among German students and "Ausflipper" in the Rock and Roll or Country Music medium, such as one by Ulrich Roski, was played on tape. The texts of these songs, often brilliantly satirical, appealed very much to the students and demonstrated the international impact of this current American musical development. The satire of *Wir Wunderkinder* dealing with the 1913-1956 period was brought up to the present time.

After lab practice on the reading text and grammar exercises, each student responded to questions on the reading selection in the following way. The instructor developed a question on each sentence of the text, previously assigned as intensive reading, using its structure and vocabulary in a slightly varied context. Each question was designed to force the student to focus upon and use the language under study—lexical and structural—in formulating a response. Passive language acquisition during reading was thus rendered active. As Wilga Rivers has pointed out, oral practice of language material previously heard and read is an important step in the transition from passive to active mastery.[6] Cultural material unfamiliar to the student was then explained in short German sentences using and elaborating upon the language material of the text. The constant surfacing of cultural references, both directly in the text and indirectly in its implicit satire, provides a wide variety of interests. Explication of these points, using the vocabulary of the text in short sentences, precludes boredom, which so often threatens the usefulness of repetition in language instruction, and encourages students in the transfer of newly acquired language to a variety of contexts.

After listening and oral reading practice in the language laboratory and the classroom question-and-answer-period on a particular section of the text, the students heard that section of *Wir Wunderkinder* in excerpt from the film sound tract. All excerpted sections were heard at least twice, and students were free to use the lab for further independent listening practice at anytime. In this way, student comprehension of the entire sound tract at the end of the course was much higher, and the narrative sequences were easier to follow, making the movie more enjoyable. Such procedures are well in line with current research on the use of interspersed questions.[7] Slide sequences to match taped sections of the text are planned. Tapes for private use in the lab are being prepared to enable students to practice independently at their own speed.

The teaching of German at all levels could benefit vastly from the development of more such scenarios. Particularly, courses in composition and conversation should be enlivened by the use of feature film scenarios in textbook editions. In no other teaching medium is language and human presence so free of cultural transmutation as in a film. The importance of film in teaching English literature is being acknowledged.[8] Its relevance to our discipline has been either superficially explicated in impractical generalities and platitudes,[9] viewed in limited pedagogical terms,[10] or, regrettably, ignored.[11] With such a rich array of feature films readily available, some of us should undertake the task of editing appropriate scenarios.

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Continued Next Page

Continued from page 17

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